



Connecticut Students for a Dream

Empower. Educate. Advocate.

Dear Senator Coleman, Representative Tong, and members of the Judiciary Committee:

We, Connecticut Students for a Dream, call on the members of the Judiciary committee to pass and vote favorably on Senate Bill 427: AN ACT CONCERNING CHILDREN IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM AND GUARDIANSHIP APPOINTMENT. This bill would allow youth to be able to file for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) up to the age of twenty-one instead of the current eighteen years old, which is limited by the state's definition of a minor child.

Connecticut Students for a Dream is a statewide youth led network fighting for the rights of undocumented youth and their families. We do this through many strategies including community organizing, leadership development, and advocacy. Our organization is made up of our members and leaders, who are high school aged, college aged, and young adults from the entire state of Connecticut. We have active teams in Danbury, Hartford, New Haven, Norwalk/Stamford, and Willimantic.

Based on interactions with many students around the state and the experiences of our members, Connecticut Students for a Dream sees this bill as essential to help protect some of the state's most vulnerable immigrant youth. Children and youth that qualify for SIJS are fleeing violence from their country of origin and have been abandoned or are no longer connected to their parents and family. Federal statutes already extend this benefit to those up to the age of 21 but the state's definition of a minor child limits this benefit to those under the age of 18. This is leaving many youth out that could potentially qualify.

It is not hard to imagine the difficulties that these youth face. We have heard many stories of these young people fleeing from their home countries by themselves, becoming unaccompanied minors entering the United States, youth that have lost contact with one or both of their parents, youth that do not know anything about the system when they get to this country. Therefore, many times these youth do not have access to basic services such as high school education, ESL classes, and others because they do not have an adult present to guide them. This also means that many youth do not find out they qualify for SIJS until it is too late to apply.

Our college access program coordinator recently met with a senior in high school. He is connected to an aunt but is mostly on his own, trying to go to high school, eat, work in some capacity. However, being undocumented makes all of many times harder. He fled violence in his home country of Guatemala and has no one to go home to. He would be a perfect candidate to qualify for SIJS except for one thing; he just turned 18. If he were living in New York or Maryland he could apply as they have raised the age to 21 but in Connecticut he has very few options. An adult in his life even reached out to Congresswoman Esty's office, who got in touch with lawyers and our organization to try and figure things out but this age limit is the barrier that all of us have run up against.

There are other youth in the state in similar situations that want to stay in Connecticut because they have nothing to go home to. They want to go to school here, work here, become members of American society but many simply discover the path too late. Connecticut does not have to create an entirely new law to do this, simply amend the definition of minor child for this specific instance, which the federal government already recognizes.



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We urge the committee to vote favorably on S.B. 427 for the sake of these children and youth.
Thank you for allowing us to submit testimony.

Sincerely,

Stefan Keller
College Access Program Coordinator
Connecticut Students for a Dream